

Moore
Interview with Bob ~~Moore~~ Brooks

INT: So if you will look at me during your answers, if you want to gesture by the way, you can. If you want to stop for any reason and answer feel free. We are not going to ask you every last question we asked Meredith because we got plenty of good answers. We have questions for you and we will get going in just a second. Try to get a little bit of the question into the answer.

INT: Sam, if you will shut up and let him to talk for a little bit we can get a -talk to Sam about anything you like to talk to him about.

R: Okay, I will ask you again then if you know about owl houses.

INT: Out houses or owl houses.

R: Owl houses. There is an owl house that we were just discussing before you sat down. Owl houses you can clear off great about of gofers that come in. But you have to have to give them a substantial about of living quarters.

INT: Please describe when and how your father came to be in control of San Miguel Island. What was the sense of opportunity? Why did he go after that lease? What did he want to do out there?

R: How he made that contract or came to know about San Miguel - I don't remember him ever saying exactly what had happened. But we know that he was in Imperial Valley for three years, coming there right fresh out of college and not liking the environment there at all and then the Vail family was a little bit in the neighborhood there because they had agriculture properties in Arizona and certainly the

Channel Islands would come up in the conversation from people who were in agriculture -or resending cattle or renting sheep and stuff. He contacted who was controlling the island at that time -I think it was called the Bureau of Lighthouses and that later evolved into the BLM in the Bureau of Land Management and it had not been used in a decade or more and I think the nominal, if it was a dollar -the reasons for that was to formalize the lease. He tried for many years to get longer leases. I think the longest one had was for five years and every time they renewed it they never increased it very much. The real, I think, draw to the island was low overhead.

INT: What did he set out to do once he had the lease? What was his business opportunity? What did he do with the land?

INT 2: Bob, before you answer can I just repeat one thing that sam asked of your sister and that is to repeat "my father" and start with "my father" instead of saying "he is"

R : Okay. My father undoubtedly familiarized himself with what the possibilities were. The Channel island, some of them are better ranches than others. I think maybe that's why the Vail family maybe water feed it was better and San Miguel in history had been a sheep ranch and probably because they were tougher and there was less feed there and that's okay for farming sheep so he had no background in owning or renting sheep that we know of in those types of operations but probably just found out about it, learned about it, thought it was an opportunity and went from there.

INT: How did your dad first meet Herb Lester? Where did they meet and how did their relationship develop?

R: Well my father and Herby, from what we understood and what they have told us and what the Lesters have told us, were in adjacent beds in the Walter Read Hospital. They had both returned from France, both participated in Word War I and just conversations -. Both of them were from back east and I think both of them probably "go west young men, go west" type of thing, there was so much opportunity out here. Herby found that my dad wanted to go to California, he had been there before, he already had the lease on the island and said "probably stay in touch -that is something that really sounds interesting" and they did. And then there is the gap between 1919 and 1930 when Herby arrived with or just before he took his family over there. So there must have been contact because my father always needed somebody took look after the ranch and make sure people didn't steal sheep or go onto the island -you couldn't have a situation when there was nobody there. So I think Herb was a perfect fit.

INT: How did your father and Herb balance their responsibilities. Who did what and how did they communicate?

R: My father and Herb, I think, there wasn't any supervision of people who were working or shipping sheep and I think he was there during those times and he would have been the supervisor telling people what to do and how to do it and arranging for the shipping of the boats and the barges and all that stuff. Then when that was over it

was just Herby taking care of the ranch with his family and looking after things.

INT 2: Pause for a sec. were going to switch this to the other side. Do you know -we wont waste time on the question if you don't know the answer but do you know who ran the island during the "lost years" as you call them or 1919 - 1930 or the "in between years?" Not that its important I just -

R: No, we don't. There was a man named John Russell who went with him to a San Nicholas island during the 1923 drought. He had to -he got a 5 year lease and he went and moved all his sheep down there and he and John Russell and my mother. My mother was not really a outdoorsy person so much but she went with him on the island and they built the first building for somebody to live in. John Russell was a carpenter and then I think he had a series of caretakers but certainly Herb was the one that lasted the longest and certainly the one that we knew the best. I don't remember many of those names, I think there was a number of them.

INT: Do you have some stories about life on San Miguel island during the Brooks era. Meredith told us a few do you have any different ones that pop into your mind? About the ranching operations? Or ship wrecks? Or relations with neighboring islands? Or your father coming home in triumph after a good sheering or sad after a drought? Help us with a couple of stories to paint a picture of the life there.

R: You know I think it was -it wasn't any kind of a dream operation. I think he had a lot of feelings about it - a lot of mixed feel-

ings about it. I think that the Robinson Cereauso (sp) aspect with the National Geographic and Life Magazine and everybody coming up were to portray the family and publicize it were sort of a romantic aspect to it. I think a lot of the reality that we used to hear from him was sandflies, wind, cold, bad weather. We have letter at home from the people who bought the wool in San Francisco and they complained about how full of sand it was. You know a lamb and a sheep with excrete lendelin (sp) and the wind blows and the lendelin hangs onto the sand and so he would get docked. Even though is usable and stuff he would take a lot of docking from that. That was a complaint and that was part of his description of "this is not a wonderful business"—its a tough business. He was probably doing it because he was making a profit and stuff like that. I think that his time spent over there, which was a month at a time, 3 times a year, was —and having somebody else to take care of it the rest of the time was one reason it worked. I sure don't think he would have ever even thought about or dreamed being over there more than he was. It was one of those things that is a blast of hard work, its over, and then you wait for another episode of work that would be in the offing. But, yeah, it was a mixed back, so they say as to whether or not he liked it or not.

INT: Did he ever talk about the Vails, his neighbors on Santa Rosa and the comparable struggles they would have? Or did he have stories about dealing with the Vails.

R: He did. I think that the Vails were very helpful to my father. My father didn't own a boat and I think before the big boat that the

Vails had that was taken over before World War II, and it was sunk somewhere in the Pacific somewhere, was that the Rio Grande or Carol. One of those big boats that they used as a cattle boat was also I think tow his barges that were full of sheep into Winemi where they would be offloaded and then shipped from there during that operation. But they were really good friends and I think they both enjoyed the part of their lives that involved the islands and stuff. Al and Russ were younger than my father so some of my really, really old memory are Ed Vail - the Dad. He was quite a charter, he had a yacht in Santa Barba that we used to hear famous stories about him and his boating escapades. He would visit in Carpenderia but I can't remember when Ed passed away but I was a little kid when that happened.

INT: How about George Hammon. He played an important role in the day to day at San Miguel Island in terms of not only providing great friendship to Herb Lester but providing services - transportation and mail and food and all that - Do you have any stories about Hammon? Can you talk about his role on the island? Taking off from Monisido - did you Dad talk about that? Did he know him?

R: George Hammon was, in particular, a terrific personality in my life away from the island because I went to school with his kids. We thought that Bunnymead was the way that everybody lived. That is the estate that they had. It had a grass airport and George Hammon used to take us for rides in that same airplane. It would take off - it was all grass - and just barley get above the coral casino and then he would fly us around. I remember one time he flew us down to Hammot to visit

a girl he had gone to school with and again we didn't think anything of it. This is just the way the time was. He was a great aviator, he worked for Republic Aviation as a young man and worked on the Spirit of St. Lewis in San diego and then retired to Monidio, and was a wonderful engineer which Seth has inherited. Seth is a great engineer too. So they would visit us at home and they would talk to us a lot about the island and I think they even had a little name for the airplane. As you get off the airplane isn't there a picture showing "San Miguel Mail Service" or something on it. And also groceries. I think that was his hobby. I can remember him having a stager wind beach crop which was an airplane from the 30s -so he was always a pilot, so he was always flying something. I was there one day when he returned one day from Kansas City with a brand new Banaza, it was the first V-tailed Banaza so that would have been in the late 40s. That was probably the airplane he used for flying two and from. That was a great connection they all felt I think really part of something, part of the island because of what he did.

INT: What do you think Hammons motivation was? We know what Herb was doing out there and we know what your dad was doing out there but what go George Hammon interested in going out to the island to try to help a couple of sheep farmers trying to run a sheep operation.

R: I think the family connection because of grammar school and the fact that we all went to school together and that Ms. Hammon and my mother were friends, George and my father were friends. I got an

airplane and you got an island. I think it was a natural connection. I think he probably just loved doing that.

INT: Wonderful. Did you father ever speak of his opinion as to why Herb chose to end his life out on the island. Does your dad ever talk to you about that and try to explain it to you?

R: No, he did not and I wouldn't know what goes into those kind of things. Its a lot deeper information than we would ever be privy to from the Lesters.

INT: Fair enough. Could you talk about the years after the Lester family left the island which I think in 1942. What went on in San Miguel Island?

R: I don't think that there was any real change because of the part of the Lester family island history being over with. I think that the business went on. World War II was still in the midst of that but I don't remember if that had any effect on the island. He always had trouble find people to want to assume that life over there as care taker. You had to -thats like camping out full time. There was more than 1 or 2 care takers after Herby passed away. The end of the lease in 1948 or when they broke the lease in 1948 was very very sudden and I don't think there was any anticipation what-so-ever that that was going to happen.

INT: Could you describe that? Your father had a lease, he had a ranching operation going on, what happened?

R: I can remember the shock because even as an eight year old I can remember the family conversations of "this can't be happening" and

"this is not right," "this is unjust," "are they crazy?" Who would ever think they could end a live stock operation in 72 hours. I mean that doesn't make any sense even if you were the government and had disposal to the boats and equipment and everything else. But they came up with that idea. I remember my mother driving to Port Winemi which was in control of San Minguel and getting a stay and I don't remember how long it was but they gave them enough time to get all the equipment and sheep off the island which they did. They still didn't have enough time to do a thorough job. They left a couple hundred head and I don't know if that number is accurate or not, but I know that people that would go back to the island would see sheep walking around with wool dragging along in the sand because they hadn't been sheered in a few years. 1950 - you know they were shooting the lambs, the sheep, you know the pilot and practicing strafing the island - I don't know if they ever sent any rockets or missiles over there but everything ended up getting destroyed. That was a big financial hit to his whole operation. He hired an attorney, the attorney was from Oxnard, they went to Washington DC, my father did not go but the attorney passed away in the middle of the claim and my father who was in poor health at the time never renewed the pursuit of it and probably other attorneys told him that he would probably never get anything out of it and the cost of pursuing those kinds of things. He just backed away from it. That was unfair, unjust, it was a really really lousy way to end what he had done out there for 33 years.

INT: Thank you. Just you know, the aftermath of that -your feelings about what has happened to San Miguel since then, all the way up to today.

R:Well, my father commented upon that. He was around and certainly we talked a lot about the islands within the family and with all of us about things. He used to say, "My god, I hope they don't make a public park out of it." He had had experiences where leaving Santa Barbara to get to San Miguel they would go up to point conception and turn left and so he had one time in weather where it took his 48 hours to get out there -just fighting, fighting, making zero knots per hour and just having to keep at it and he said if its ever something that has public access people will go out there. They will go out there in boats that aren't appropriate, that aren't safe and he said you will lose lives. Its hard for me to say what I think should be going on there but it probably wouldn't be wise to have it open where you can just say San Miguel's, going out there for an afternoon pick nick or whatever-it just wouldn't be smart, it would be too dangerous. Probably the government it not willing to supervise it anymore than they do now, which is to have occasional visits from the park service people just to check on it and there is a structure out there that they can live in and stuff and so don't know really what the answer is other than the fact it should not be a place to go visit. The channel is one of the roughest ones in the world.

INT: Anything we missed that you what to talk about, any stories or thoughts?

R: No, you got a great description of the accident that my father had out there and I was a little surprised that my sister didn't say "check the date on that, because we weren't born yet." We are kind of lucky to be here. That accident happened in 1937 or 1938 and Kai wasn't born nor was I. The other part of that story is that Dr. Eider which is a really well know great old doctor is Cottage Hospital for years was one of the doctors that came in because of the remarkable story of his survival in saying that the womb looks great and we wont touch it and stuff. But my mom had actually gone into the hospital with her check book after all that had happened, I think he was there for 10 days or so, asking them -this is pre-medicare and all those things and -asking them "What do I owe you?" and Dr. Eider had written on the hospital chart "No Charge." She couldn't believe it and in comparison to what we all know now days about hospital costs and stuff like that, thats part of the past that you wish -thats the good old days kind of a thing. There are a lot of stories and I think you get more from the Lester family because they were full time and boats are coming in and going out. There was the era when weather stations were coming in and when a radio station came in and of course the part of that story where the flag flew upside down was pre-radios and stuff. Our stories are mainly these bursts of activity when he was working to share land or stuff like that. It was just rounding these temporary laborers up. The whiskey story is great but there is another whiskey story which was during the prohibitions. My father said that the prohibition was one of the most fun times in his life on the side of en-

tertaining ones self because he had a friend that had an apple ranch and so when he went coming back in, before 1940, when he lived in Los Angels, they went up and there was an apple ranch there which was perfect -they could make hard apple cider. Herby may have been in on that, you would have to ask the Lesters because that was against a remote agricultural apple ranch and he may have actually spent some time there himself. But another thing was finding this boat that was adrift and it was a bootlegger and he had Vat69 with him and so my father towed him in or towed him out and so out of that episode he got a couple of cases of Vat69 and became the most popular guy in LA because all the sudden the parties -there was a famous story of Ed Vail coming over and taking apart in the Vat 69 and then there was an open man hole or ditch that the street department was working on driving right into it. There was a lot of stories. That was the fun side and those things were repeated to us a lot of times and he always got a big chuckle out of it. But prohibition wasn't as bad for the guys who wanted to work at finding some boos or hootch or whatever.

INT: Any stories out of the killer whale bar?

R: No, the pictures say it all. I think you had to get up very early in the morning and have a huge huge breakfast because I don't think when you are working out on a ranch there is no way to service lunches or anything and I don't know what they would take with them. Really, I think there was two main meals a day and I think the meal in the evening was shortly after you would go to the killer whale bar and you have seen the picture of them pouring drinks out of great big bot-

tles and I think those guys sat around there and then when to bed. Imagine how tired and how much hard work that must have been and that was the routine for the shearers and the laborers and stuff that they would send out there during shipping. But I think they spent a lot of time in the killer whale bar. I don't know who named it but probably Herby and if you ever see a diagram of the ranch house it really is ingenious how its on that triangle. The one to blockage sand and wind, the other is laundry, bunk houses and then a living quarters that is separate from -they really laid it out right.

INT: The mention of the ranch house makes me wonder why is it still not there. Did the navy drop a flare on it? Any idea what happened to the ranch house?

R: We just herd that everything was shot up. Whatever they would find, whether it was the last remaining sheep and then vandalized, the broken windows and stuff. Some of the people that saw it towards the end said that all of the windows were busted out and it looked like somebody had been there for -Another good story is the B24 that crashed there because we had always heard that my fathers crew found it and that they had thought that the plane had crashed up in San Francisco somewhere and the weather was so bad similar to the bad weather we have heard about from the tragedy in Honda and the Cuba ?? (23:59) - there they used to get some much worse weather than now for whatever reason and that it crashed there. When I went out to visit 10 or 15 years ago you could still see part of the tail but its all gone now but -They took the armor plate off of it because you could lift it

off and the armor plate that protected the pilot, the machine guns were all bolted ?? One of the machine guns, one of the rumors was that that was buried out there, that they covered it in gunny and sacs and buried it somewhere -god knows where that it. But that was a very interesting episode because they didn't know where the plane was for such a long time and when my father found it, grimly enough, the crew was still there.

INT: Was that on the land or in the water -

R: On the land, on the land yup. There are photographs of it with bent propellers and gapping holes and stuff like that and I guess when it crashed it just deteriorated over the years. I would think something is still there but I don't know how much.

INT: The navy is giving us a very hard time about getting on Saint Nicholas island to film the cave where the archeologist believed the lone woman of Saint Nicholas lived. The navy gave Marla and your organization and very hard time about having the reunion a few weeks ago. Was it the navy who kicked your dad out then subsequently strafed and bombed, if you don't mind would you tell us what happened. Was it the navy kicked my dad out and gave him -just in case we want to put a little zinger in on the navy, not saying that we would. But what role did the navy play in having your father leave the island and how did he feel about it.

R: He was devastated by that. The navy which is the federal government. I am sure there would be a lot of players there. It would be the navy who wanted to bomb it and strafe it, use it as a target. Then

there was the BOM who controlled it and was renting it and who we had our lease with. That is the federal government. Its just inconceivable, even now to think -anybody could read the description of what happened and said well he should have been compensated for it. They broke a lease, they took his operation away form him, they absolutely coldly stopped him business and paid him nothing, zero. So all he was able to do was sell off his sheep and get out and take his equipment off and stuff and he got nothing for it. At least in this day an age - its the same thing as being condemned. They condemned his business for not ?? (29:24). I don't know why my father didn't pursue it, I think his health and age had something to do with it. But he certainly deserved to be compensated for taking his business from him in that manner.

INT: You have a last one?

INT 2: Of course I do.

Meredith: I was wondering, Bobby, if you remember the sheep coming in to Sterns Warp, there were corrals on Sterns Warp and as a kids we would be waiting there to see the boats come in and the unloading of the sheep and now to think what Sterns Warp is, no corrals on it. I wonder if you remember that?

R: That rings a very vague bell. I remember Port Wainemi more because Port Wainemi was set up to be a docking area where you could bring in the docks and stuff. This was another thing you could only do in the 40s and not even dream about today is that he drove 1000 - 1500 sheep and loaded them and drove them down Wainemi road. And now

Wainemi road is main artery between Wainemi and Camerio as it is today, its a two 3 lane road but in those days agriculture took precedent over traffic and so these sheep would be moving down the road and the cars had to get out of the way and where the pens was a piece of pasture property that my father purchased to hold and to have a place a place to ship his sheep from -as a matter of fact it has a common fence with Point Magoo, which is a little bit ironic but that is where he would take the sheep and ship them from there.

INT 2: Thank you. The question I ask which I think has been covered all over the place is what was your dad like. What type of person was he like to be around, what time of person was he.

R: He was a raconteur par exultance. Once he took the stage people used to sit around and listen to stories. He was a great great story teller and I think that 99% of his stories were island related. Some college -everyone has their stories of things that they did that they think are worth repeated but he was a really really great story teller. All of us kid, bringing our friends back to the house, Mike's friends, or Kai's friends, or my older sisters friend really enjoyed that would always talk about going to hilltop, as his home was called and listening to the stories. They were very very entertaining, maybe embellished a little bit, but thats okay.

INT: Can you think of one, not to put you on the spot, but can you say "Well, for example I will never forget the crazy story told about .."

R: I think he told a lot of stories about the toughness of the life and I think he told a lot of stories about kind of repeating the Robinson Cereauso aspect of it. I think he really enjoyed telling the stories about the -the SS Cuba was for years on the rocks there. As long as it lasted the waves would make the mask go up and down which was quite a sight and I can remember him describing what it was like there with the unexpected visitors, the ship wrecks, and things like that. He had a large supply of stories.

INT: I get it -

END OF INTERVIEW

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